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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEGUCIGALPA 000263

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM ECON ETRD SNAR KJUS PINR HO

SUBJECT: HONDURAN PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES: LOBO IN DEAD HEAT
WITH PASTOR IN NATIONAL PARTY; ZELAYA IN A LIBERAL CAKEWALK

REF: A. 04 TEGUCIGALPA

B. 04 TEGUCIGALPA 2646

C. 04 TEGUCIGALPA 2635

D. 04 TEGUCIGALPA 1541

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Francisco Palmieri;
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Less than three weeks before the February 20 national primary elections, President of Congress Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo, who has long trailed Tegucigalpa Mayor Miguel Pastor, drew close or even with Pastor in three recent national polls. Lobo and Pastor's battle has become increasingly nasty, with exchanges of corruption charges. Lobo appears to have a structural advantage as the race enters its final days. Meanwhile, in the quieter Liberal Party race, leading candidate Mel Zelaya has no close competition, and is poised to win. End Summary.

The Polls Agree - National Party Race a Dead Heat

¶2. (SBU) PolOffs have now seen three reliable, national polls, all of which show the National Party race between President of Congress Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo and Tegucigalpa Mayor Miguel Pastor as very close. A January 28-29 private poll conducted nationally by Ingeneria Gerencial shows Pastor with a very small edge of 48.3 percent vs. 46.7 percent for Lobo, close to the margin of error. A January 22-27 poll conducted by CID-Gallup has Pastor with a slightly larger lead of 47 percent vs. 41 percent for Lobo, with a 2.8 percent margin of error. A January 10-15 poll done by Demoscopia has Lobo with a slight lead 41.8 percent vs. 40.1 percent for Pastor (with a margin of error of three percent).

¶3. (SBU) Surprisingly, or perhaps not if you listen to his detractors, Pastor's biggest weakness is Tegucigalpa, where he has only 36 percent support as opposed to Lobo's 58 percent, according to the Ingeneria Gerencial poll. In the same poll, Pastor (47 percent) and Lobo (46 percent) are virtually tied in San Pedro Sula, with Pastor leading in rural areas and Atlantida, the department with the third most populous city, La Ceiba. Lobo has a strong lead in his home department of Olancho and appears to be seeking to gain votes there to offset losses in other rural areas. Given the historical importance of the vote in Tegucigalpa, Lobo's lead could pose a serious problem as Pastor would have to run extremely well in every other part of the country (save Olancho, Pepe's home base) in order to make up Lobo's likely victory margin in the capital city.

¶4. (SBU) Lobo and Pastor's battle has become increasingly nasty, with exchanges of corruption charges and hints of Lobo having possible ties to narcotraffickers. In a serious strategic effort to change the subject from crime, an issue that benefits Lobo greatly, Pastor blasted Lobo's campaign for numerous alleged connections to the "gasolinazo" scandal. Lobo, in turn, used a Supreme Court of Accounts report concerning an audit of extravagant public relations expenditures by Pastor's mayoral office, to point a corruption finger at Pastor. Ironically, Lobo used a "cadena nacional," a complete preemption of all television and radio broadcasting, to rebut Pastor's charges and criticize Pastor's use of public funds for pr. President Maduro has weighed in to urge the two to scale back their attacks, but Maduro's defensive criticism of Pastor's corruption charges are seen by the Pastor campaign as establishment support for Lobo. Maduro did, however, come out publicly against Lobo's pet idea, the death penalty, joining all the other major presidential candidates who also oppose it.

Zelaya Maintains Commanding Lead Among Liberals

¶5. (SBU) Politician Mel Zelaya has a commanding lead in the Liberal Party race, with 52 percent, as compared to 21 percent for Congressman/businessman Jaime Rosenthal and 13 percent for economist Gabriela Nunez, according to the Ingeneria Gerencial poll. Zelaya is equally strong in urban and rural areas. In the CID-Gallup poll, Zelaya has 45 percent, with 16 percent for Rosenthal and 11 percent for

Nunez. The Liberal Party race has effectively become a race for second between Rosenthal and Nunez.

16. (SBU) Liberals and Nationalists have ridiculed Zelaya's recent poor showing on a key morning TV interview show, when he ducked all tough questions and made several misstatements later used by Nunez in the toughest TV ad of the Liberal race. Politicians and pundits from across the spectrum in conversations with EmbOffs knock Zelaya as not being smart enough to be president. However, this is apparently not a sentiment shared by people planning to vote in the Liberal Party primary as Zelaya shows no signs of slipping in the polls.

Key Mayoral Races Too Close to Call

17. (SBU) In Tegucigalpa, Lobo's mayoral candidate Ricardo Alvarez holds a small lead over Pastor's candidate Nasra "Tito" Asfura, 47 percent to 44 percent in the Ingeneria Gerencial poll, and leads 49 percent to 37 percent in the CID-Gallup poll. Alvarez's pollster has him up 10-15 percent over Asfura. In San Pedro Sula, Lobo's mayoral candidate Arturo "Tuky" Bendana is edging out Pastor's candidate (and incumbent mayor) Oscar Kilgore 43 percent to 40 percent in the Ingeneria Gerencial poll, while Kilgore has a small lead over Bendana 35 percent to 32 percent in the CID-Gallup poll. Kilgore's pollster has the two in a dead heat. On the Liberal side, in Tegucigalpa Rosenthal's candidate Eliseo Castro has a narrow lead over Zelaya's candidate Enrique "Kike" Ortez Sequeira 28 percent to 27 percent in the Ingeneria Gerencial poll, and a commanding lead of 33 percent to 14 percent in the CID-Gallup poll. In San Pedro Sula, Zelaya's candidate Rodolfo Padilla Sunceri comfortably leads Rosenthal's candidate Harry Panting 37 percent to 24 percent in the Ingeneria Gerencial poll, and 34 percent to 14 percent in the CID-Gallup poll.

Congressional Races Anyone's Guess

18. (SBU) With congressional candidates running as individuals, but representing entire departments and not individual districts, there is little campaigning between candidates, other than emphasizing which potential presidential nominee the candidate supports. Observers are unsure if congressional war-horses with relatively high name recognition (but questionable popular support) will win in the primaries. With little polling done for individual congressional candidates, there are likely to be some significant surprises and upsets in the election results.

Pastor and Lobo Deadlocked; Zelaya Certain to Win

19. (C) Comment: The election will likely hinge on turnout, with a high turnout benefiting Pastor who has stronger support among young voters. However, this is a risky strategy. To paraphrase political consultant James Carville, there is a word for candidates whose strategy relies on young and new voters: losers. In addition, with Pastor's weak support in Tegucigalpa, Lobo's strong upswing in the polls after the December 23, 2004 bus massacre of 28 people in San Pedro Sula, and Lobo's support from party stalwarts, Lobo has the inside track to win. Lobo's "Work and Security" campaign, which has focused mostly on security, and whose symbol is a clenched fist, is clearly betting that fear will beat Pastor's "New Time" campaign that focused on hope (before turning to anti-corruption). While Pastor has managed to staunch the bleeding with his tough attack on corruption, many observers comment that Pastor lacks the moral authority to champion transparency and good government. Nevertheless, Pastor has effectively changed for the moment the topic from crime, a losing issue for him.

110. (C) Comment continued: The bitter battle among Nationalists has led some observers to question whether or not the party can unite for a general election battle. The Liberals, despite having twice as many presidential candidates, are clearly more united. The only Liberal candidate who really appears to be trying to win (rather than just have a modicum of influence in the party) is Nunez, who has run hard-hitting ads. At the moment voters are evenly split on party preference, but a bitterly divided National Party coming out of the primaries will most likely boost Liberal chances in November. Historically, in all six previous presidential elections, the front-runner in national polls at Easter has always gone on to win the general election. End Comment.

Palmer